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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000063

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SUBJECT: ABRUPT RESIGNATION OF IRAN'S TOP NUCLEAR NEGOTIATOR MAY SIGNAL HARDENING REGIME POSITION

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) Summary: The abrupt resignation of Ali Larijani as Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) on

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Oct 20 is being read by many observers as a move to forestall any compromises on the nuclear issue, despite the assertion of the government spokesman that Iran's nuclear policy will remain the same. One Iranian-American political analyst said the move indicates that Iran is confident of its position and does not perceive a credible threat from the US. An Iranian political science professor noted that the move will have implications for conservatives in the 2008 Majles elections. Larijani's replacement as SNSC Secretary and chief nuclear negotiator is Saeed Jalili, the Deputy Foreign Minister for European and American affairs, who has been described as devout and ideologically in line with President Ahmadinejad. Jalili also reportedly served as director general of the Supreme Leader's office from 2001-2005.

2.(C) Summary cont'd: It remains to be seen whether the change was initiated by Supreme Leader Khamenei, who may feel that Larijani was becoming too compromising a negotiator, or by President Ahmadinejad, in a bid to increase his control over nuclear policy. It is notable that neither Khamenei nor Ahmadinejad has made any public comments about Larijani's resignation. Larijani will remain on the SNSC as one of the Supreme Leader's representatives. It is not clear whether he will continue to have a role in Iranian nuclear policy, or whether he intends to run in the 2008 Majles elections or position himself to challenge Ahmadinejad for the presidency again in 2009. End summary.

Timing of resignation unexpected

3.(U) Iranian government spokesman Elham announced the resignation of Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Larijani on October 20. The fact of the

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resignation was unsurprising—the rivalry between Larijani and President Ahmadinejad is well known—but the timing was unexpected. The announcement came only days after a meeting between Russian President Putin and Supreme Leader Khamenei, on the sidelines of a summit of Caspian Sea countries in Tehran. Larijani, who was reportedly not present at the Khamenei-Putin meeting, told state-run news IRNA on Oct 17 that Putin had presented a special view about Iran's nuclear program during the meeting and that Iran would study the view proposed by Putin. However, the following day President Ahmadinejad directly contradicted Larijani, denying that Putin had proposed anything regarding the nuclear program. In the resignation announcement, government spokesman Elham said that Larijani had submitted his resignation several times in the past, and that Ahmadinejad had finally accepted it on this occasion. Elham said that Larijani resigned for "personal reasons" and to pursue other political activities.

Replacement announced simultaneously

4.(U) On the same day that Larijani's resignation was announced, presidential advisor Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi also announced the appointment of Saeed Jalili as Larijani's successor. According to press profiles of Jalili, he is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war and a close friend of Ahmadinejad. Jalili was reportedly born in 1965, has a PhD in Political Science (NFI) and served as director general of the Supreme Leader's office from 2001-2005. After the 2005 presidential elections, he became an advisor to Ahmadinejad, and in September 2005 became Deputy Foreign Minister for European and American Affairs. Jalili has been described as devout ideologically in line with the president.

5.(U) Some conservative MPs and newspapers have criticized Jalili's appointment, complaining of his comparative lack of experience. Conservative newspaper Hamshahri wrote that although the resignation will not change Iran's policies, "it will influence the course of the talks. The absence of a skilful diplomat in the talks will have serious repercussions."

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Other conservative newspapers, including Resalat, Jam-e-Jam, and Keyhan, praised Larijani in editorials and commentaries. Expediency Council Secretary Mohsen Rezai called Larijani's tenure "successful and productive" and that he "successfully foiled many threats using his acumen and acting within the framework of his mandate from the Leader." MP and Majles Research Center director Ahmad Tavakoli (reportedly a cousin to Larijani) said he was "saddened" by Larijani's resignation, adding that Larijani's status and power to attain the rights of Iranians was more than that of a "deputy foreign minister with a low profile."

Changes in nuclear policy?

6.(C) Government officials have asserted repeatedly that the resignation will not result in any changes in Iranian nuclear policy. However, several observers and analysts have commented that the change indicates a hardening of Iran's negotiating position. Two Iranian businessmen separately told IRPOff that Larijani was likely perceived as too flexible, suggesting that Larijani had become more compromising during the course of his nuclear talks with the EU. One Iranian-American political analyst who was based in Tehran said that the resignation means that Tehran is confident of its position on the nuclear issue and does not perceive a credible threat.

7.(C) It remains to be seen whether the change was initiated by

Supreme Leader Khamenei, who may feel that Larijani was becoming too compromising a negotiator, or by President Ahmadi-Nejad, in a bid to increase his control over nuclear policy. It is notable that neither Khamenei nor Ahmadi-Nejad has made any public comments about Larijani's resignation. Larijani will remain on the SNSC as the Supreme Leader's representative, but this is likely simply a face-saving gesture. The foreign ministry spokesman also confirmed that Larijani, along with Jalili, will meet EU foreign policy chief Solana as planned Oct 23 in Rome. Beyond the Oct 23 meeting with Solana, it is not clear whether Larijani will have any further role in Iranian nuclear policy.

¶18. (C) Larijani's resignation and apparent abrupt diminution in status mirrors the similar fate of Iran's preceding SNSC secretary and chief negotiator on the nuclear program, Hassan

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Rowhani. Rowhani was similarly defrocked in July 2005, a sensitive juncture in negotiations with the EU-3, and replaced in both capacities by Larijani. According to press reports at the time, Rowhani submitted his resignation to Supreme Leader Khamenei just prior to the inauguration of president Ahmadi-Nejad the following month. Under Rowhani, Iran had voluntarily suspended nuclear enrichment for two years during negotiations with the EU-3. Observers speculated that Rowhani, who was close to Khamenei and generally considered a trusted conservative pillar of the regime (much like Larijani), was removed for being too accommodating in nuclear negotiations.

Election implications

¶19. (C) The political analyst also suggested to IRPOff that Larijani may have voluntarily resigned in order to disassociate himself from nuclear policy and avoid being blamed for any serious repercussions, particularly in advance of the 2008 Majles elections. The analyst suggested that by resigning Larijani disassociated not only himself, but also the traditional conservatives, from the more radical Ahmadi-Nejad. The analyst was not optimistic, though, about Larijani's chances of winning the 2009 presidential election, if he decided to run.

An Iranian political science professor said the resignation should be viewed in the context of the Majles elections. He suggested that the conservatives needed an insider to "play the role of opposition," a tactic which he said was successful for them in the past. The professor said that in the 2005 presidential election, Larijani strongly criticized Khatami-era compromises with the IAEA, while Ahmadi-Nejad's comments were somewhat more moderate. It is not clear yet whether Larijani intends to run in the Majles elections in March, or to challenge Ahmadi-Nejad for the presidency again in 2009. Conservative groups have had difficulty coalescing to create an electoral strategy, and Larijani may be a figure that traditionalists and moderate conservatives could rally around in the run up to the

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March Majles elections.
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